

# **The Memory of Water: Familiar and Strange**

By

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## ABSTRACT

The principal aim in undertaking this project was to discover, through the discipline of painting, a pathway to analysing my emotive response to a particular body of water.

Water's ability to reflect and distil emotion, while simultaneously evoking memories, has been a significant factor in my investigation. How was it that something so familiar could simultaneously appear strange? This question derived directly from the experience of observing the flooding of the Cataract Gorge in Launceston in 2009, where a vast body of water was narrowly confined by the Gorge cliffs. In my earliest work for this project the grid was used as a means of capturing the essence of the containment of these waters. As the project progressed the grid receded.

The process of re-framing the paintings by attaching them to a stretcher after completion raised the question: to what extent can water be shaped? By re-framing, my focus moved to an analysis of the opacity of many layers of paint and glazes without the distraction of the edge, generating a further research question: to what extent is what is remembered ephemeral and/or influenced by experiences felt at the time of observation?

Initial experimentation included a variety of media, including watercolour, ink, acrylic and oil-based paint. Paper was my preferred surface until early 2011. By finally choosing to work on canvas, the paintings attained more depth and dynamism. This was achieved by underpainting in acrylic paint, and overpainting in wax paint paste and oil glazing gel, mixed with oil paints. Using a variety of card, palette knives and occasionally squeegees to apply the paint, both random and purposeful marks reflected the often ambiguous nature of both memory and water.

I make reference to artists who articulate the uneasy position between perception and analysis such as Rachel Whiteread and Ian Burn. For David Hockney, memory is comprised of individual layers, while Kathleen Petyarre, Sandy Gellis and Patrick Grieve utilise various grid formations to map their familiar environments. Negotiation of the uncanny, between containment and open-ended potential, is exemplified by Carlo Scarpa. The artists Peter Sharp, Tim Maguire, Annabel Nowlan, Richard Woldendorp have responded variously to emotion, reflection, familiarity and the sublime.

*The Memory of Water* traces the awareness of the multiple levels of conscious and unconscious thought/feeling co-existing in the remembered experience of particular sites.

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## INTRODUCTION

The genesis of this project, *The Memory of Water*, can be traced back to an experience I had several months before beginning my candidature for a MFA degree. In July 2009, the Launceston Cataract Gorge flooded and the spectacle drew thousands of people to view the turbulent rushing waters from the apparent safety of the paths on the sides of the Gorge. It was quite discomfoting to gaze down into the swirling mass of water and try to recall exactly where the familiar sites of swimming pool and weir were underneath. They were there, somewhere, but at the same time it seemed possible they would not be visible, or even exist, when the water receded.

This exegesis and accompanying visual practice explore the idea that when water is contained it becomes familiar, unthreatening, compared to when it is uncontained, strange and uncomfortable, and therefore perceived as threat. Yet is it possible to contain water? This particular question led to a series of paintings that began with the use of a horizontal grid as a method of containment and included qualities of familiarity coupled with disparate strangeness or discomfort. These works revealed an ambivalence that was difficult to ignore. Was it possible that the recollection of water could simultaneously be a source of comfort, but at the same time threatening? Perhaps this ambivalence would rely on utilising memory to make a connection to the strange, a suggestion I discuss in Chapter 1, Familiar and Strange.

So this project's central aim began as an exploration of the emotions that I have experienced looking at, being on, or in, a body of water. The ability of water to reflect and distil yet also engender fear of the unknown are qualities found in many sublime landscapes but I feel they are best encapsulated by the ocean specifically. Lucy Lippard captured my response clearly when she wrote:

Artists can make the connections visible. They can guide us through sensuous kinaesthetic responses to topography, lead us from archaeology and landbased social history into alternative relationships to place...The dialectic between place and change can provide the kind of no-one's-land where artists thrive (1997, p. 23).

To make the connection between my own emotions and water I have tried not to refer to my past method of painting from a photographic source, and instead I have

painted from memory. While this has held some pitfalls (initial experiments became increasingly similar to each other), I have since focused on moving towards a more abstract depiction that, while still retaining an element of familiarity, merges into the strange or uncanny.

In Chapter 2, Water and Memory, I explore the concept that my memories could be part of a group/collective memory, or the formulation of a new memory. To capture the mobility and dynamism of water, and of memory, is paradoxical. It is similar to an attempt to confine or contain, yet set free, emotions or thoughts. The containment of water by utilising the grid has been very important in this project as I describe in Chapter 3. This device recalls 16th century architect and painter Giorgio Vasari who:

...drew a frame around each of his drawings, a frame that signified their elevation to the status of unique works of art by masking the edges of the sheet of paper and thereby liberating the image from the material world ... (Wigley, in Hill 2006, p. 36).

Although I initially divided my grid into horizontal areas as a method of orientation and reference to landscape panorama, I have since confined the grid to the outside edges of the paintings, as it has been difficult for me to disregard it altogether. The grid was an intrinsic element in my work in the beginning – it was an aesthetic device which I employed to emphasise the contrast between both the containment and flow of water. As the grid became less obvious, or nearly completely obliterated in recent works, so too has my depiction of water become less representational and tumultuous. Interestingly, while the grid seemed to disappear in a rigid sense, the application of the original underpainting developed a loose grid-like structure (Fig.1) and the scale of the paintings was near the sum of the early experiments in Gridded Water Study (Fig.4, p.11). The dissolving grid began simultaneously to recall light and the reflective qualities of water.



Figure 1: Helene Weeding, Raw underpainting showing loose grid structure, February 2011

Rumination about water as a source of emotion and reflection brings to mind Tristan Tzara's statement that 'Of all the elements, water is the most faithful 'mirror of voices' (cited in Bachelard 1983, p. 193). Bachelard goes on to state that art can be informed by reflections and that 'The stream, the river, the cascade have, then, a speech that men understand naturally' (1983, p. 194). Gazing at a body of water, I have felt corresponding emotions well up. Sometimes this poignant reflection results in a sense of peace, as though my turbulent thoughts have found a place to rest.

In Australia, due to geological and latitudinal placement, water is often scarce. A lack of natural harbours, estuaries and wetlands, in comparison to other continents, ensures unique difficulties regarding aridity and land-use. In Western Australia, for example, aridity is 'part of one's consciousness' (Seddon 1997, p. 221), while in Tasmania the annual rainfall is much more abundant, generally more reliable, and often taken for granted. Some areas of Australia have experienced years of drought, but Yi Fu Tuan suggests that while there is a distinct global hydrologic cycle, inevitably 'the outcome is always the same: water returns to the point of departure, the ocean' (1968, p. 4). This is somewhat reminiscent of the cycles of human, animal and plant life, but the point of departure is simultaneously the birth site. As a birth site, water can represent nourishment, protection and a sense of connectedness.

Rebirth and regeneration were obvious when I recently travelled to see Lake Eyre filling with water from the floods in south-eastern Queensland, in January 2011, as I describe in Chapter 4, Reflection, Light and Emotion. The water had encouraged wildlife expansion and a vegetation growth unseen for the past 37 years. I felt a sense of connectedness combined with a feeling of personal insignificance. While rebirth, protection and nourishment can be attributed to many situations, the devastating floods of Queensland stand in stark comparison:

Shocked residents are returning to the death zone below the Toowoomba escarpment where freak rains turned placid streams into raging waters strong enough to punch through houses and wipe away all evidence of life...The flotsam and jetsam of Monday's carnage, when a 300mm dump of rain overwhelmed the landscape's ability to drain, was the familiar, violent signature of natural disaster (Lloyd 2011).

While Graham Lloyd refers to the violence of the water and intimates the change from life-giver to life-destroyer, it was interesting to note his description of the tempest as 'familiar' as I can imagine the Toowoomba residents would not feel at all comforted by this. In Brisbane, the usually benign Brisbane River, which has been embraced and developed into cultural arts sites such as South Bank, has shown that while it is the city's 'greatest asset' it is also 'one that, in hindsight is also its most dangerous' (Parnell 2011).

Lake Eyre was an absolute contrast to the floods occurring in Queensland at the same time, underlying the complete disparity between two major events in Australian history, both dependent on the overabundance of water. The devastation caused by floodwaters made me realise that even though I have inevitably been drawn to the ocean, and have responded to the emotive and aesthetic layers that resonate from it, the ocean is not the only body of water to contain elements of mystery, threat, the unknown, to reflect emotions or even exert a calming influence.

For me, the most dramatic and inspiring body of water is the sea: 'We all come from the sea, and the sea is the mother that we carry within ourselves' (Plisson & Buchet 2006, p. 90). If life began in the sea, as diplomat and natural historian Benoît de Maillet proposed in *Telliamed* (1722-32), then the sea is our source. Many artists and writers, such as François de Chateaubriand and Guillaume Apollinaire, have sought inspiration from the sea. Indeed, Chateaubriand regarded the sea as 'my cradle and my image' (Kline 2005) and utilised the cradle metaphor often, especially when he

travelled across the sea to begin a new part of his life. Other metaphors refer to water as 'bodies' alluding to the blood circulatory system in the human body. Similarly, in Roman times rivers were often utilised and conceived as roads or systems, transferring people and wares with relative speed ease in comparison to road transportation, which was slow and cumbersome. Water can therefore be gentle and lulling, fast and light, scarce or abundant. It is this ambiguity that often attracts.

Initially, in approaching this project, I drew on my subconscious memory and corresponding emotive response using card, palette knives and a variety of tools to apply the paint to the surface. By doing so, I embraced an element of chance and randomness; the application method cannot be strictly controlled, yet has surprised me with its inherent familiarity. This surprise began after the initial Water Study Experiments (Fig.4) and a series of paintings began to take shape. I wondered why the paintings were mostly depictions of very rough, stormy seas. Upon reflection, I realised that they were an outpouring of suppressed emotions from an earlier turbulent phase in my life, which had been held in check for over nine years. What was familiar to me became totally strange and unfamiliar during these years and then morphed into a hybrid; neither completely familiar nor completely strange. Throughout this period I painted very quiet and seemingly peaceful subject matter as painting was an escape. With acceptance and a recent distinct improvement in my situation, I subconsciously felt free to give full rein to those emotions that had never been fully expressed. By the end of this 18-month period of intense study, what had begun as depictions of stormy seas had developed into larger, calmer and deeper interpretations of what lies underneath, coupled with a growing interest in the surface quality of water, the visible meniscus that cannot be felt. From a turbulent beginning, the water was eventually stilled:

The quiet sea at the edge of the earth.  
The long plane of the shimmering world.  
The mind slips its moorings,  
leans to the planetary winds,  
to oblivion (Hay 2010).

This exegesis explores the idea of water as an expressive vehicle and an inspiration for my paintings. I have always responded either consciously or unconsciously to a

body of water and despite feeling soothed and uplifted many times, sometimes I have felt frightened and alone; a frail human being pitted against the deluge. Water can be strange and familiar at the same time.

The aim of this project is to explore and reveal this simultaneous effect through painting, relating indistinct and distinct memory, with all its accompanying layers, to a similar ambiguity felt in the presence of a body of water.

## CHAPTER 1

### Familiar and Strange

Inherent in the local is the concept of place – a portion of land/town/cityscape seen from the inside, the resonance of a specific location that is known and familiar. Most often place applies to our own 'local' – entwined with personal memory, known or unknown histories, marks made in the land that provoke and evoke. Place is latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person's life. It is temporal and spatial, personal and political (Lippard 1997, pp. 67-68).

When a human being enters a space in an unknown landscape he/she often tries to decipher what is strange in order for it to become familiar. If 'someplace' is where we feel safe and comfortable then 'no place' suggests threat and discomfort. Perhaps 'All places exist somewhere between the inside and the outside views of them, the ways in which they compare to, and contrast with other places' (Lippard 1997, p. 33). If this is correct, we live in a type of no-man's land of constant negotiation, and I find this view too difficult a concept to apply to the familiar environment I inhabit; the dichotomy inherent in foreground versus background. Perhaps it is truer to suggest that there are degrees of familiarity and that living and moving through a space is a concrete experience. From there attachments and close proximity result in a lived-in feeling and a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging translates into familiarity.

If becoming familiar to, and with, a place implies attachment and close proximity then the strange would suggest detachment; but in some cases the familiar can change and become different or uncanny. Additionally, it depends on the mode of engagement, as some new experiences can be very exciting. When I looked down at the flooded Gorge it was quite uncomfortable to try to feel familiarity and connectedness when everything below me was totally strange. The feeling of disorientation was uncanny as what was known and experienced beforehand was replaced by a sense of threat. At the same time I was mesmerised by the swirling and violently powerful torrent of water. Anneleen Masschelein suggests that the early 20th century Freudian concept of uncanny creates a problem as it exposes a paradox:

... as a concept, the uncanny problematises the very act of conceptualisation and theory formation. And yet ... precisely because of its structural vagueness/openness, the concept seems particularly suited to articulate certain tendencies in late twentieth-century thought and art (2003).

This 'vagueness/openness' reflects the strangeness of the floodwaters and has become the linchpin for my active interrogation, via the medium of paint, into the very emotive, yet disturbing, reaction that emanated from this sight. Sigmund Freud (Masschelein 2003) regarded the uncanny as an aesthetic experience in the broad sense of the word; he felt that it existed in both everyday life, as well as in art. The strange or uncanny seems to belong in the sphere that is related closer to a metaphor than a scientific concept. While the term *Unheimlichkeit* (uncanniness) suggests categorisation and inclusion into the grotesque and the sublime, *Heimlich* literally infers familiar as well as hidden; a sort of inside/outside or positive versus negative association:

Unheimlich in the sense of strange, unfamiliar, uncanny, eerie, sinister ... is then clearly the negation of only the first meaning of Heimlich and as such, it almost coincides with the second, negative meaning of Heimlich ... Freud concludes his lexicographic research by stating that the specificity of the sensation of the uncanny lies in the fact that something is frightening, not because it is unfamiliar or new, but because what used to be familiar has somehow become strange (Masschelein 2003).

Maria Kaika agrees with Masschelein and refers to *das Unheimliche* as an 'unhomely' feeling which can occur when the hidden or outside systems of the home operation are disrupted and the outside, or excluded, invades the safe and familiar 'inside' or *Heimlich* (2005, pp. 67-68). Kaika also states that the two supposedly opposite terms merge when 'things that ought to have remained hidden come to light' (p. 69). Rachel Whiteread's installation *House* (1993-94) is a good example of an artwork producing a disconcerting reaction in the viewer, while Australian conceptual artist Ian Burn also evoked similar feelings with his artwork produced in the early 1990s. In *Value Added Landscapes* Burn placed perspex sheets printed with text over found landscapes by anonymous artists depicting the Australian bush. These works suggest Burn's view that Conceptual Art 'replaces the customary visual object with arguments about art'



(Burn, in McNamara 2009), and provokes an uneasy response which finds the audience caught between perception and analysis.

While neither of these two artists has directly influenced my paintings, the ideas behind them are very much what I am aiming for by producing what one viewer expressed: 'They make me feel slightly uncomfortable and some are hard to look at'. This was my response to the flooding of the Cataract Gorge and also relates to my art practice, in which I am endeavouring to capture through a group of works a memory that may be familiar to many people yet simultaneously evokes a certain feeling of discomfort. While the artworks are paintings of no actual site, and are simply a product of my imagination or unconscious memory, my approach would suggest an exclusion of conscious thinking. Despite this, I make distinctly conscious decisions during the process of painting. This reflects the paradox cited by Masschelein previously, that the uncanny becomes something that cannot be pinned down; it becomes elusive '... because it entails a necessary repression of the doubt that is always inherent in the uncanny' (2003). Thus, there is a conflict present between subjectivity and objectivity that allows for concurrent ambivalent meanings to take place. My paintings attempt to negotiate these two ideas, striving for the strangeness of ambiguity as well as familiarity. Whiteread and Burn achieved a sense of defamiliarisation and it is a technique I have also adopted, to persuade a viewer to see something that is familiar in a different or strange way and provoke a new awareness of the familiar. This tactic is not new: it has been utilised particularly in 20th century art movements, including Dada and Postmodernism.

The purpose in adopting this device is to convey an awareness of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. Kalus says that there is a distinct advantage for the artist in 'seeing things as unfamiliar, unknown, or even as meaningless' (Kalus 2010). Brady Wagoner also observes that creativity is made up of two pathways that are related and at the same time in opposition: '... the former "makes the unfamiliar *familiar*" whereas the latter "makes the familiar *unfamiliar*"' (2008). *Strange* occurs, therefore, when two elements meet where neither one is immediately comprehensible to the other. A method of linking or *knowing* these disparate elements could open up possible creative responses in an attempt to find a place or explanation, and perhaps represent it in a new context. As a result, do we try to make sense of the strange by falling back onto a cultural construct or pre-existing

ways of thinking? Are we relying on memory that is linked to the familiar parameters that map our world, translating it into recognition?

George Seddon regarded landscapes as a 'cultural construct' and asserted that how we move, act and utilise the landscape is 'informed by our culture' (Seddon 1997, p. xv). This approach implies that even if we think we are being objective in our response to the environment, we are actually influenced by preceding experiences, some of which can be misleading. Therefore, if we wish to 'see' the landscape as it is, Seddon suggested we look at the unfamiliar or strange and that taking a photograph is not the same thing. While previously I had used photographs as the basis for my exploration of landscape painting, this particular approach is one I enthusiastically adopted. Individuals will invariably see something that is unique to them and this view will inevitably be coloured by personal experience and culture. To take oneself away from the familiar into the strange, unfamiliar or uncanny requires a different vision. While looking at the flooding waters at the Gorge I found myself examining patterns of movement and forms that appeared and disappeared. I felt both beauty and despair as the flood reflected innermost emotions as well as an awareness of subtlety coupled with directness. If I adopt Hill's assertion that 'The uncanny is experienced when something familiar is repressed but returns as unexpected and unfamiliar', (Hill 2006, p. 74), then the challenge would be to reinstate a relationship with the unfamiliar by drawing on memory to make a connection to the strange.

### **Why Blue?**

Deep-blue/black has been an important aspect of my paintings and while I do not have black in any of them, I often mixed darker blue tones with lighter ones to evoke a sense of the unfathomable, the underneath or the unknown. This unknown disrupts the familiar and known (or memory) surface of the water and leaves the viewer with something like the predicament felt when looking at Ian Burn's previously cited *Value Added Landscapes*. I have experimented with the grid in differing ways and have found that even when I deliberately chose quite a variety of tonal contrasts of blue and green, they had the initial appearance of looking very much the same as each other from a distance. Closer inspection was required to see the subtle changes between each separate panel that formed the grid (Fig. 2).



Ultramarine Blue/Titanium White	Southern Ocean Blue/Titanium White	Paynes Grey/Titanium White
Midnight Blue/Titanium White	Paynes Grey/Australian Sky Blue/Titanium White	Mineral Blue/Hookers Green/Titanium White
Mineral Blue/Paynes Grey/Titanium White	Prussian Blue/Titanium White	Paynes Grey/Hookers Green/Titanium White
Ultramarine Blue/Titanium White	Southern Ocean Blue/Midnight Blue/Titanium White	Midnight Blue/Paynes Grey/ Cobalt Turquoise/ Titanium White
Cobalt Turquoise/ Mineral Blue/Titanium White	Prussian Blue/ Titanium White	Phthalo Green/ Southern Ocean Blue/Paynes Grey/ Titanium White

Figure 2: Helene Weeding, Gridded Water Study, May 2010      Table of paint tones used in the study

My initial experiments in depicting water were abstract in appearance. I began with a grid of squares and used watercolour paint and coloured inks as a medium. The application of lines of colour symbolising water running down or across a surface seemed to lack the emotive outlet I was unconsciously seeking, and the experiments resulted in essentially flat, unemotional and decorative pattern-making (Fig. 3). These works, albeit aesthetically appealing in their use of colour and repetitive mark-making, were the antithesis of what I had set out to achieve and lacked resonance with the very qualities of water I wanted to capture: energy, mystery, danger and ‘unfathomability’.

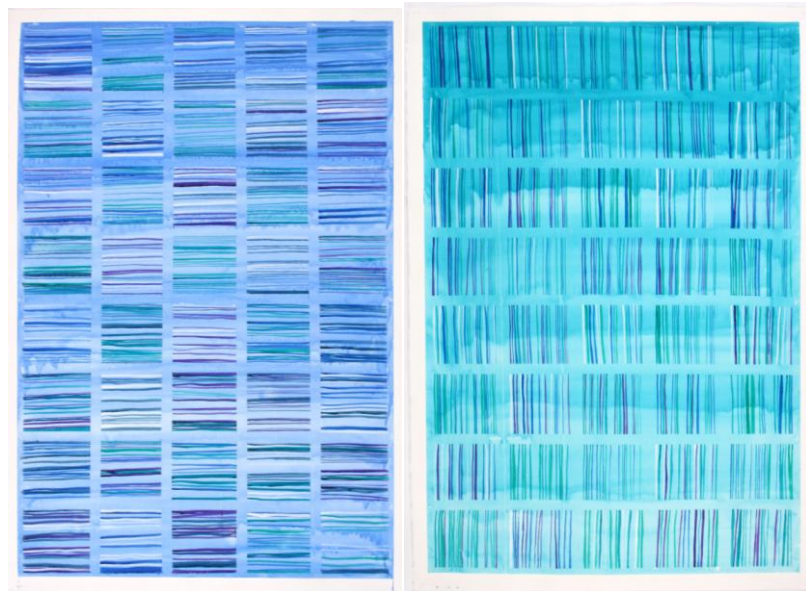


Figure 3: Helene Weeding, Experiments # 1 & 2, March 2010

After abandoning these experiments I decided to ignore my traditional painting tool, the paintbrush, and opted instead for a selection of palette knives and Matisse Structure paint and began a fresh approach based on intuition and memory. Photographs were not referred to and the results were very pleasing, as the element of randomness that came from using the palette knives gave a fresh energy to the final result. The use of a horizontal grid separated the picture plane and was reminiscent of a 'group' or 'collective' memory despite originating solely from my memory or imagination.

More experiments followed in the Water Study series (Fig. 4) in which I reversed the grid structure and also introduced other tonal variations. Eventually I reverted to the original structure and subsequent colour palette of tonal variations of blue, green and white. This repetition was almost becoming an obsession but was nevertheless still exciting and I was reminded of, and encouraged by, Michael Tarantino's description of Italian artist Franco Magnani's numerous paintings of Pontito in Tuscany, which were all based on memory of the place where he was born. The paintings are ambiguous to read:

Magnani's landscapes bear witness to the relationship between repetition and similarity: the more he recreates the views, the more his position in relationship to them becomes both closer and more distant (1994, p. 138).



Figure 4: Helene Weeding, Water Study Experiments, March-April 2010

Edmond Fitzgerald, in his book *Marine Painting in Watercolor*, suggests that ‘An artist’s palette is as personal as his signature; it reflects his opinions and objectives – in short, his personality – and each individual will develop preferences as he paints’ (1972, p. 14). Artists such as Goya and Degas utilised a restricted palette but it was interesting to note that Fitzgerald also adopted this selection and cobalt blue, French ultramarine blue, viridian, cadmium yellow and cadmium orange, formed the basis of his blue/green water colour palette. While I had a certain limited palette, I decided to use more than just two blue colours as I aimed for a variety of different tones sourced from my memories of bodies of water seen in rivers, oceans and seas from the trips I have taken in Australia, Europe and South America over the past 20 years. By minimising the palette initially, it had the effect of unmasking other aspects of the painting such as subject matter, style and content. Through simplification, diversity was achieved.

In the ensuing months, I made a breakthrough in my palette selection and began to broaden my colour range to include light red, magenta, cadmium orange and violet, to name a few. This exploration coincided with painting in much larger format. While it appeared that this was a different course, I realised that the scale was similar to the 15 individual canvas boards which comprised Gridded Water Study (Fig. 2). Instead of being in a portrait format, they were now landscape, but still evoked the concept of the panorama or horizontal grid. The larger paintings were informed by video footage

I had taken both in Tasmania and in South America. By stopping the footage at random places, interesting images, both abstract and representational, emerged. Instead of being an observer from a distance, the resulting paintings were drawing the viewer in, to investigate what was happening beneath the surface. The surface itself also began to fascinate me as the milky meniscus that can be seen when looking down, or across, gently undulating water, was visually tangible but could not be felt. Many experiments were conducted with acrylic mediums but eventually the only satisfactory result was in converting from acrylic underpainting to layering over with oil glazing gel mixed with oil paint. Depth and surface began to work together.

There was definitely a feeling of diving into an unknown realm and taking a huge risk, as if my comfort blanket had suddenly been ripped away. I was once again 'all at sea' and in more ways than one. The familiar had become strange. Lippard writes:

Sometimes when people move to a place they've never been before, with any hope or illusion of staying there, they get interested in their predecessors. Having lost or been displaced from their own history, they are ready to adopt those of others, or at the very least are receptive to their stories ( 1997, p. 23).

Perhaps this view could also suggest tapping into a memory that is familiar to many and making it one's own. This reflects the ambiguous nature of water: how by re-establishing a relationship with it when it appears strange and connecting to memory is a method of familiarisation.

## CHAPTER 2

### Water and Memory

I believe that my memory is comprised of things that are totally familiar on one hand, yet by their very familiarity can become strange also. When I try to remember exactly how people and places were in the past, I often resort to trying to recall emotional responses to that particular moment, which by nature are imperfect and flawed. A few years ago, two of my sisters and I were together discussing an event that occurred when we were young girls. Despite the fact that all of us remembered the event very clearly (it was quite traumatic), we all had a completely different response emotionally to it. My eldest sister saw it from an angle directly opposed to my youngest sister, while I took the middle road. This was fascinating, as all of us were convinced that our particular emotional memory was correct. If memories shape us, do we choose to interpret some or all, depending on our particular place in a family, or is it more to do with the unique characteristics that form us? I am aware that in my own family, I am regarded as 'artistic' and therefore not completely objective or necessarily reliable. I spent much of my childhood imagining I was someone/somewhere else – dreaming, and not paying much attention to the world around me:

There is at the back of every artist's mind something like a pattern or a type of architecture. It is a thing like the landscape of his dreams; the sort of world he would wish to make or in which he would wish to wander, the strange flora and fauna of his own secret planet (GK Chesterton in Tarantino 1994, p. 138).

Was this world I inhabited as a child real or simply an illusion? Mark Tansey refers to landscape art as the representation of 'an illusion of an illusion' (in Friedman 1994, p. 169), as a landscape can mean an actual site or the depiction of one. This depiction can encompass memories assembled over a lifetime which through the medium of art can express interior dreams and imagination to a point where the interior or unconscious overlaps with the conscious exterior. Caroline Rannersberger proposes that contemporary landscape artists are mainly concerned with representing the sublime, which she states is the 'gap between the artist's imagination and representation' (2010, p. 21). While Rannersberger believes this gap could be

regarded as the site for the myth or metaphysical, I regard this gap as a repository for memory. The landscape painting experience for me begins with sensation; I then draw on memory and the completed painting is the final concrete result.

David Hockney, in the DVD *David Hockney: A Bigger Picture* (Wollheim 2009), states that, according to Chinese tradition, three things should be present when an artist is making work: 'the hand, the eye and the heart'. He goes on to suggest that making an artwork is almost an unconscious act and instinct also plays a part in creative endeavour. I felt an echo in many of the thoughts Hockney expresses so clearly when he refers to trusting his own instincts and working quickly, which often produced the best results. He adds:

You paint with memory even when you are here. There is no such thing as objective...You are painting from memory of yesterday morning. We always see with memory...we can't be looking at the same things can we? (Wollheim 2009).

Despite this statement that all of us are influenced either consciously or unconsciously by our own memories, I believe that there exists a collective memory of a pictorial language formed by cultural experience that strikes a chord in many of us, or as Gaston Bachelard suggests, '...the same memory issues from every spring' (in Schama 2004, p. 244). This would explain how, even when I painted a close-up, large-scale section of water and made it consciously non-representational by using a colourful palette, there were responses from random viewers, with no previous knowledge of my motivation, that I had depicted water:

... each of bears within our consciousness countless visions of interior landscapes, assembled over a lifetime of memories, imagination and dreams, which we can sometimes experience fully illuminated, even through closed eyes. Through the power of art ... we can enter such spaces where interior and exterior visions of landscape coincide. (Beardsley, in Friedman 1994, p. 232).

This view accords with the responses I received to my work. The interior/exterior landscape visions combine with the afore-mentioned collective memory, shared by many. If memory refers to the ability to collect, retain, remember or retrieve information or sensations, then the retrieval of stored (episodic) memory also encompasses emotions. The emotional aspect of memory is a powerful source and while it can colour a specific memory, I believe it is instrumental in evoking a place or



environment. In recall, sensory effects are often remembered; the coldness or warmth of the sea, the saltiness tasted, the wind felt and the hidden depths barely, or clearly, seen. When I think about various homes I have lived in, it is not only the rooms I remember, but how I felt in these places. Some memories make me feel protected and secure, whereas others summon recollections that are fraught with fear and trepidation.

Lucy Lippard states that place is identified by memory (1997, p. 23). This view could also be applied to Indigenous people and refers to the idea of home in a broader context; an inextricable part of the psyche which becomes felt. Kathleen Petyarre is an Indigenous artist who exemplifies this immersion in her environment:

...Kathleen's facility in land-navigation is reflected in her artistic production. This apparently astonishing ability to reconstruct, from memory, detailed and accurate mental maps of her childhood terrain has remained with Kathleen throughout her life (Nicholls & North 2006, p. 7).

Even though Petyarre's 'mental maps' of the places she grew up in are potentially much larger than a combination of all of the homes I have lived in, the feeling I have experienced when viewing her paintings is one of the memory of her home. Although they are 'detailed and accurate', they are not without emotion. They are quietly moving, reminiscent of slowly moving water (Fig. 5).

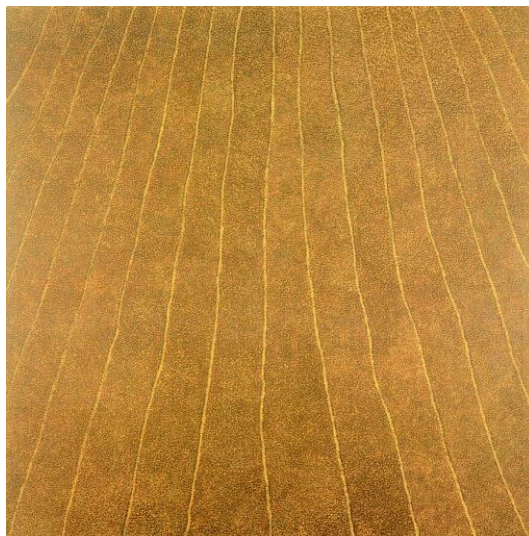


Figure 5: Kathleen Petyarre, *Mountain Devil Lizard Dreaming – Sandhill Country* 1999

While I had been researching water and memory from a mainly artistic standpoint I became interested in a quasi-scientific (tongue-in-cheek) approach that began by simply Googling 'memory and water'. It was fascinating to discover that in 1988 French scientist Jacques Benveniste expressed the view that pure water could retain a memory of what it had held previously. This controversial stance had evolved from a scientific basis. Benveniste had distilled allergy-contaminated water to a pure state but found it was still able to activate an allergic reaction when it was introduced to living cells. The furore that ensued could have resulted in the revision of the laws of both physics and chemistry, but Benveniste's laboratory findings were subsequently found to be unreliable and he removed himself from the academic world. Nearly 15 years later, *The Hidden Messages in Water* by Masaru Emoto was published and became a *New York Times* bestseller. In this book Emoto, through scientific research, 'personalised' natural (in comparison to tap) water by simply praising (the water capacity expanded), abusing (the water capacity decreased), or ignoring the container (the volume remained the same but the water became cloudy). Emoto further states that:

At Fujiwara Dam in central Japan we had a Shinto priest of the Shingon Sect named Houki Kato repeat an incantation. When I first met him, he showed me two photographs that made a lasting impression, and so I wanted to see for myself what he had recorded in the photographs. One of the photographs had been taken before an incantation, and the other after; the second photograph showed a remarkable difference – the water was considerably clearer.

The power of the incantation had come from the *spirit of words*, and so it is possible that the energy from the *spirit of words* had purified the lake (2001, p. 89).

Emoto then began taking photographs of crystals that formed in the water before and again after the incantation, to prove the visual evidence. He found that the crystals from before the event were distorted and that those after were complete and whole. While the basis of this research is scientific, there is no denying Emoto's belief in a higher supremacy, or at the very least in the power of positive thinking. This belief incorporates both the mysterious and known elements that comprise water.

After a primary investigation of the known elements of water, and response to the emotive qualities I experienced through my painting, essentially the artworks I

produced early in this project were quite representational. This was despite my determination to ignore the paintbrush and any reference to, or reliance upon, photographs. I was probably trying to recall a total memory, rather than a fragment. In more recent paintings, I aimed to capture more of a rapid frozen moment that alludes to the strange or uncanny and endows the work with tension, movement, uncertainty and an element of surprise. By referring to video stills instead of faithfully rendering photographic images, I was able to experience the essence of a moving body of water, not a frozen photographic image. Adding layers of coloured glazes and working in both thick and thin mediums formulated new meanings and contexts through the fragmentation of a memory. Lippard writes, 'Artists can be very good at exposing the layers of emotional and aesthetic resonance in our relationships to place' (1997, p. 286). This exposure may include, and allude to, the multiple levels of consciousness/awareness co-existing in the process of an experience of a particular site.

As Tim Winton says:

Often, though, looking simply isn't enough. Most of what I've learnt has come out of the corner of my eye. A feeling for place creeps up on you when you're not trying to dig it up with your eyes. When it comes to landscape, seeing is about experience (Winton 1999, p. xv).

This poetic observation struck me with force, as Winton manages to encapsulate what I have felt often when viewing a landscape, and also underline why I have had the urge to *paint*, not print, sculpt or take photographs. Inevitably, despite the quality of any camera I have owned, I have been bitterly disappointed with my efforts to capture what I thought was a view of an amazing sight, when really it was the absence of my particular experience or personal response that was missing. The immediacy, intuition and sheer energy required to delve into myself and distil the accompanying emotions that are attached to my response to water, has been exhausting, enlightening and also at times frightening.

Through layering paints and utilising different sizes of card to apply the paint I have explored the characteristics of chance and variability that are essential facets of my paintings. Once I took the leap into working on very large pieces of paper, and eventually large canvasses, it was incredible how much more liberating and expressive the paintings became. The viewpoint also changed, and instead of the

audience standing at a distance from the water, as in earlier works, the viewer was now encouraged to enter the paintings; to delve deeper. While there were still some qualities that were representational, the source was far less obvious, and the ambiguity of some of the paintings was very pleasing. Questions were now raised: 'How far do I want this to go?' 'Do I really need to recall water specifically or simply depict the emotion that I remember?'.

If I depict a remembered emotion by fragmenting it, as I suggested earlier, then utilising a grid was one method I adopted in an attempt to contain this memory and make it familiar, so that I could connect to it more readily.

## CHAPTER 3

### Containment and the Grid

Edward Casey, while discussing American artist Michelle Stuart's artwork, refers to her use of the grid as a method for achieving 'a sense of connectedness' as well as an 'inherent scannability' (2005, p. 84). It is to this notion that I have addressed much of my artwork, particularly the aspect of connectedness. I initially adopted a horizontal grid as I believe it is a potent orienting device in viewing the landscape. By separating the picture plane into increasingly larger sections as the eye travels from top to bottom, the horizontal grid also allows for closer inspection of the various parts while simultaneously taking in the painting as a whole from a distance. This means that the paintings operate on different levels and imply the 'scannability' suggested by Casey. As our eyes do not simply look forward, but also around us as we move about, the grid helps to separate what is seen into sections that make each entity separate but ultimately part of a complete work. Another use of the grid is examined by Sandy Gellis in *New York City Rainfall: 1987* (Fig. 6).

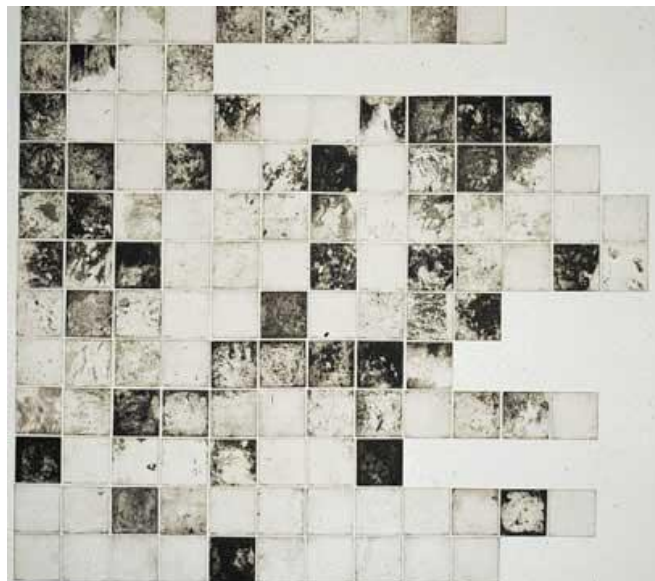


Figure 6: Sandy Gellis, *New York City Rainfall:1987*, 1987

In this work, the grid is obvious but the conceptual basis is suggested by the title. Gellis recorded the entire rainfall for the year 1987 by placing brass plates on a window ledge outside her apartment. The result is a patterning that is light or dark, depending on the amount of rain that fell. Blank spaces were left between the plates to denote dry days but the pattern is rhythmic and subtle in monochromatic tones. These parameters map out the world bit by bit and translate the strange into the familiar.

Kathleen Petyarre also maps her own particular world. By living in, and being totally familiar with her environment, Petyarre is able to envision large areas and reproduce them visually, albeit in an abstract form. This sense of abstraction is achieved by a very careful organisation of the picture plane, 'relying on a grid pattern that she maps out in detail before commencing each work' (Nicholls & North 2006, p. 30). The grid virtually disappears through the artistic process of layering painted small dots over the surface, and filters through the viewing audience causing the reading of the work to vary from one person to another:

Petyarre's uncanny ability to imply layers of meaning invites many possible readings of her work, thereby both incorporating and transcending exclusively Anmatyerr interpretations, and simultaneously fulfilling spiritually hungry non-Indigenous audiences who are seeking depth (Nicholls & North 2006, p. 31).

Petyarre's paintings appeal to the broader audience by filling a gap between the familiar and strange, and connecting to contemporary modernist abstraction through repetition. The organised beauty of her paintings reveal subtlety and manifest cultural heritage, suggestive of ceremonial practices, intimacy, and the development of inner knowledge or memory. By using a grid underlay she exhibits a thorough knowledge of her homeland; often the paintings take on a bird's-eye perspective yet are based on the artist's intimate understanding of existing geological features. In comparison, the survey grid system that originated in the late 18th century was developed as a means of parcelling land and dividing a country into towns or states. In Australia, this particular grid has been 'imposed' (Seddon 1997, p. 151) on us by the British colonial power of the 19th century. It is as rigid as the continent allows and is based on a strict grid that follows straight lines, ignoring many natural features in its attempt to contain and make familiar.

Tasmania is the only state in Australia whose external boundaries are wholly natural, due to its status as an island. One artist who 'maps' this unique landscape is Patrick Grieve (Fig. 7). While his paintings are often regarded as abstract, their compositional basis is drawn from reality. It is interesting that from a bird's-eye perspective Grieve's artwork makes sense of the land around his home in Burnie, on the north-west coast of Tasmania. The rich red soil and incredibly green pastures, combined with the dramatic coastline, make this landscape highly distinctive. The actions of local farmers, ploughing and planting crops, create patterns from which Grieve derives much of his inspiration. He also paints from the sensation/experience of the environment. Grieve heightens his colour values and layers paint onto the surface to create intuitive, rather than purely representational, paintings. It is this feeling of familiarity and the textural qualities of paint combined with the often flattened grid that has attracted me to Grieve's artwork. I feel a responsive echo in them of what I want to achieve in my own paintings.



Figure 7: Patrick Grieve, *Green Horizon*, 2006

Grieve uses a flattened grid to suggest the very divisions initially imposed on the land by colonialists, settlers and farmers. The parameters of human habitation can be a fence, a cardboard box or a mountain range but we all accept and recognise these methods of containment. This restraint can also be applicable to the making of artworks.

Lippard suggests that art is about utilising a framing device of some sort and it is far more difficult to abolish the frame 'or to change frames on the spot, offering multiple

views' (1997, p. 286), but this is actually what I was trying to achieve initially through the use of the grid. I do agree, however, that it is very difficult to remove the frame completely. I have, since early explorations with the horizontal grid, confined it to the edge of the painting, but cannot seem to disregard it entirely. Brian Roberts (1996, p. 89) says that the grid has a variety of operations, as it assists in plan definition as well as allowing description, analysis and comparison of different planes. By utilising a more visible grid than either Grieve or Petyarre, I ascribe to Peter Lunenfeld's view that:

A more visible grid defines my ongoing efforts to bridge the divide between analyses of technological systems on one side and the object-based criticism we inherit from art history on the other. Finally, there is the grid that maps my own specific interests. It has been said that poets are constrained to sing from their own family tree. My tree is kinaesthetic and dynamic, more videographic than textual, more aesthetic than doctrinal (2001, p. xxi).

Accordingly, my grid is unique to me; it is an aesthetic device and I also employ it as a method of containment and open-ended potential simultaneously. While initially I adopted a multiple grid, I have since resituated the grid to the outer edges of the painting, much like a frame; in doing so, the emphasis has reverted back to the painting. In later works, I still leave a vestigial 'frame' of surface around the painted area. This is then resituated or reframed by attaching it to a stretcher and once again the emphasis shifts, similar to the experience of tearing back the masking tape in my earlier paper works, but in reverse.

Italian architect Carlo Scarpa's design of the Querini Stampalia Foundation in Venice (1959-73) demonstrates both containment and open-ended potential, as discussed above. Scarpa directed the flow of incoming water to be contained and controlled within the building's sphere by introducing a causeway construction, demonstrating that water can interact closely with architecture and need not be kept on the outside, where it is traditionally placed. By allowing the water to enter the building, detaining it, and then structuring its exit via pipes and channels to re-emerge into the canal on the ebb tide, Scarpa showed that water and tidal flows can actually become part of the building, effecting a more harmonious balance between habitat and the ever present body of water surrounding, and in, Venice (Fig. 8). This reflects the efforts of both Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright who espoused the belief that introducing



nature into 20th century architectural design would restore a healthy energy to urban living.



Figure 8: Carlo Scarpa, Stairs in Querini Stampalia Foundation building, 1959-73, Venice

Patricia Johanson has investigated habitat architecture and the containment and purification of water through her designs. These are aesthetically beautiful yet provide a thought-provoking response to water and land reclamation. *Fair Park Lagoon* was constructed in Dallas, Texas, in 1985:

Not only did she totally reconstruct this lagoon's food web, but she placed sculptures in the lagoon, elaborate entangled walkable paths with bridges and arches. Her massive paths reference two native Texas plants ... (Spaid 2002, p. 67).

In *Millennium Park* (1999) in Seoul, Johanson's project brief was to reclaim land that had been a dump site. By referencing the mythological guardian called 'haitai', she stabilised the site through using the patterns on the haitai that recall 'rice-paddy farming' (Spaid, p. 71). This farming practice is based on a grid system that collects the water and then allows it to flow through carefully constructed channels and finally exit when it has been fully utilised and is not required anymore.

Maria Kaika refers to the construction of dams and their purpose as collection and containment agents as 'modernity's Promethean project', both historic and geographic, which began with industrialisation in order to control nature by human means (Kaika 2005, p. 5). She suggests that water itself is a hybrid due to the changes it experiences as it moves from its place of origin (dams, rivers) to its eventual emergence in the family home via the tap. By the time it reaches the suburban home it has developed into a hybrid because it has not entered 'space envelopes' and has changed, becoming neither entirely pure nor entirely man-made (p. 5). Water carriers/containers have been removed from obvious storage sites, such as water towers, to underground or hidden places and consequently the process of transformation from natural to urban has become invisible. Visiting dams was popular with the public as an excursion for many families until the late 1960s, much as boat trips through the sewerage system were popular with the Parisian middle class during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This fascination with technology and progress has since abated, with the general populace regarding dams and water towers as 'mere engineering constructs' which have been 'stripped from their ideological meaning' (Kaika, p. 43). The loss of technological visibility has ensured that the various networks connecting the city/home to a natural water source have now located the underground network as uncanny or strange as it has become severed from conscious thought:

As water travels through a myriad of intricate physical socio-spatial networks (channels, reservoirs, pipes, taps) from spaces of production (dams, wells, reservoirs, purifying stations) to spaces of consumption/reproduction (city, home), it is not only its physical and social qualities that change, but also its relationship to space (Kaika 2005, p. 53).

Water becomes 'familiarised' through methods of containment, via hidden grid systems and then purification, so that it enters the home as a tamed commodity thus ensuring the presence of water in our daily lives is taken for granted, rather than regarded as a gift of nature.

When water is untamed, containing it can be a problem or sometimes a miracle. I experienced the result of contained yet unrestrained water when the Cataract Gorge flooded in 2009. More recently, I saw the strange benefits and uncanny beauty of one of the eventual destinations of the destructive Queensland flood at Lake Eyre, in South Australia.

## CHAPTER 4

### Reflection, Light and Emotion

When an abundance of water is present in otherwise dry regions, the human response is often one of disorientation, such as my view of Lake Eyre in 2011 and the flooding of the Cataract Gorge in Launceston in 2009, when it seemed impossible to discern familiar landmarks even though they were there, but were submerged under the floodwaters. The Gorge suddenly became an uneasy, almost surreal place, causing the familiar and comfortable to become a memory. The cliffs and rock walls effectively contained the torrent of rushing water and guided it down to release its energy into the Tamar River. It was this torrent that fascinated and mesmerised me, yet at the same time I was aware of a feeling of discomfort and at a deeper level, of danger. What had previously been contained now threatened to rise up suddenly and engulf me, like a tsunami wave. While water has the power to draw humans closer, it also contains mystery, a sense of threat and the unknown. Cool, calm water can suddenly change into a treacherous, destructive force and a body of water can also hold secrets, some dangerous and others sublime.

In January 2011, my husband and I travelled in our campervan to Marree in South Australia. From there we chartered a four-seater Cessna and were flown over Cooper Creek to view Lake Eyre from the air. I was reminded of the many amazing photographs taken by Richard Woldendorp (Fig. 9), of the Australian landscape from a seat in a plane similar to ours. As Tim Winton writes in the introduction to Woldendorp's book *Down to Earth: Australian Landscapes*:

Seeing the land from above offers a fresh outlook, something that can't be had in nature, so it always comes with a thrill and a shock at the very outrageousness of it ... The land divides itself up in gullies, craters, rivers, valleys and its shadows retain some secrecy instead of being mere lines. From the air you see the repetition of pattern and shape ... To see the land from the air is to witness the forces it has endured ... And yes, there is an abstract beauty that has nothing at all to do with what you are looking at. Shape, colour, repetition, juxtaposition (Winton 1999, pp. xxvii-xxix).

The abstract nature and sheer size of the land from above was truly remarkable and made me feel infinitely small and humbled. Was this why I had recently begun to

paint in a much less representational manner and had increased the scale of the paintings? Or maybe it simply validated to me what was actually the essence of the memory of my landscape dreams and I felt an echo here, above in a plane.



Figure 9: Richard Woldendorp, *Lake Eyre, SA* 2009

The Cooper Creek was running for the first time in 70 years, according to our pilot, but the biggest thrill was seeing Lake Eyre at 40 per cent capacity, an unheard-of event 50 years ago, when it was predicted that it would never fill again. This prediction was proven incorrect in 1974 when Cyclone Tracy levelled Darwin and the result was extensive inundations in Queensland, referred to as 'The Flood':

It is one of my earliest memories and it remains one of my recurring nightmares. Nose pressed against the glass of a small Fiat, fleeing from the Gold Coast back to our home in Brisbane and wondering why the sea was coming with us...

The Flood still comes to me at night like that...

It is impossible to fully grasp the impact of this week's disaster in southeast Queensland without first understanding what has happened in the years since 1974.

Because for 37 years, the children of The Flood have been told it would never happen again (Jackman 2011, p. 3).

This was the negative aspect of the miracle of viewing the return of life to the arid salt sink which makes up Lake Eyre. While we were admiring the abundant, sometimes almost fluorescent green vegetation of Cooper Creek (Fig. 11) and wildlife on Lake Eyre, the origin of the water was creating havoc and devastation in southeast

Queensland. While lives were being lost in the biggest flood since 1974, Lake Eyre had become a huge breeding ground for waterbirds such as the Australian pelican, silver gull, red-necked avocets, branded stilts and gull-billed terns, (*Lake Eyre National Park* 2010) as well a proliferation of native fresh-water fish. The situation was an ironic and poignant reminder of water as a harbinger of both death and rebirth.



Figure 10: Helene Weeding, Rain at Swan Hill prior to flooding of the Murray River, 11 January, 2011

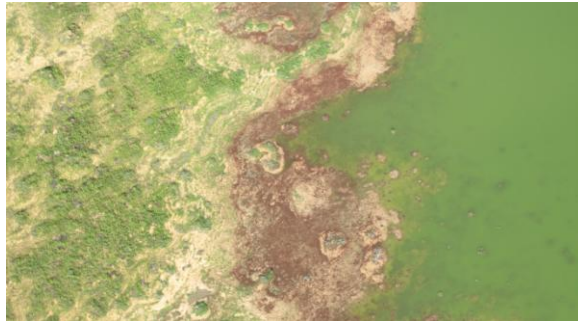


Figure 11: Helene Weeding, The Cooper Creek, 14 January, 2011

Because of the flood, what was once regarded as arid 'is set to regain its reputation as the inland sea' and if the wet season continues as predicted 'the lake could hit a depth of 6m for the first time in more than 35 years ... prompting an *explosion* of wildlife ...'(Todd 2011).

Of course, nature does not comply with human estimation or expectation and this was evident to me when I saw part of the vastness that makes up Lake Eyre. Initially, it seemed incredible that we were not able to view Lake Eyre in its entirety from the air, but when we found out that it is approximately one-sixth the size of Australia and is also one of the largest internally draining systems in the world, we realised that

perhaps only a satellite photo could fully capture the lake's immensity and beauty. The colours changed minute by minute and each image was unique (Fig. 12).



Figure 12: Helene Weeding, Lake Eyre, January 2011

By the time we landed back on the Marree airstrip, I felt renewed and revived and immediately began a series of small paintings in my journal (December 2010/January 2011, #7), recreating my memories of the colours and encrusted salt seen from the Cessna. I had become very interested in the surface of water and was experimenting with trying to capture in paint the milky sheen that I had seen in the still waters of the Murray River (Fig. 10). This was somewhat contrasted with the salt waves visible in Lake Eyre, suggestive of previous lake levels and infinite history, regardless of human habitation.

To depict both the milky meniscus and the dry salt, I experimented with many acrylic mediums with no success. The gels and mediums dried too quickly on the large paintings and were either too glossy or too dry, too transparent or too opaque. I began applying oil-based mediums over the acrylic underpainting. The best result occurred after combining oil-based paint with Langridge glazing gel, after a layer of wax paint paste mixed with oil paint was applied. Carding or using a palette knife was also the best method of application and the medium was interesting when introduced to the paint, as it immediately became more fluid and less sticky than the other gels I had experimented with. A sense of going into or beneath the surface was becoming apparent, similar to looking down into Lake Eyre when the plane flew at a lower elevation. The high point of the visit to Lake Eyre would have been to travel on the Oodnadatta Track to the edge of Lake Eyre South, as planned, but the road was impassable for our vehicle. Nevertheless, the sublime images of the lake will remain with me forever.

The sublime aspects of water have also fascinated artist Tim Maguire. In his recent exhibition *Light and Water* (2010), films titled *Bondi* and *Cook Park* (Fig. 13) show a flow of water that is almost halted. The mesmeric surfaces take on the brilliant hues of a rainbow; in *Fountain, Botanical Gardens, Melbourne*, 'without its title the viewer would be pressed to identify the visual source' (Dodge 2010).



Figure 13: Tim Maguire, *Cook Park*, 2010

Maguire also shows still photographs displayed on light boxes, but in Maguire's case the films have evolved from the photographs, whereas I have taken inspiration from the reverse situation. Reading about Maguire's approach to his paintings as being based on printmaking processes, I began to realise that I have unconsciously adopted a similar style. I originally masked the edges of my paintings, which is reminiscent of an etching or relief-print, and I use knives, card or other flat tools to apply the paint to the surface, much like using a screen-print squeegee. I have sometimes utilised a squeegee to apply the paint, particularly in the underpainting layer. Is this why I am often attracted to artists' work that reflects a printmaking background? One such artist is Peter Sharp:

Hypnotic ocean swells and silvery spun thread: these are the kinds of physical elements Peter Sharp converts into dextrous harmony on the canvas. His are not paintings of nature but of his personal relationship with nature (Gibson 2010, p. 30).

Prue Gibson states that Sharp's non-representational paintings and prints reflect an intense and intimate experience of both nature and the ocean. These artworks, essentially abstract, convey passion and emotions provoked by the awesome magnitude of nature and its tragedies. In 2003, Sharp visited Western Australia and was strongly affected by the whale carcass and bones he found at a disused whaling

station (Fig 14). Despite the somewhat grisly nature of the carcass, Sharp's paintings 'have been expanded to the wider context of tentacles...water running over flesh...and a salty water womb.' He has been able 'to create a fathomless depth, both literally and emotionally' (Gibson 2005, p. 4) which is essentially what I am aiming for in my own work.



Figure 14: Peter Sharp, *Harpoon* (detail), 2005

Another Australian artist, Annabel Nowlan who also works in an abstract style, addresses ambiguous concepts that are inextricably linked to time spent on the land (Fig. 15).



Figure 15: Annabel Nowlan, *Incursion With Legend*, 2009

Both Nowlan and Sharp have used the grid as an aesthetic device but my overwhelming reaction to their works is a deep emotional connection to both the land (Nowlan) and the sea (Sharp). Similar to Grieve, Nowlan 'finds inspiration in the



oddest and most unlikely circumstances and objects' (Brennan 2010, p. 45), which are still intrinsically familiar to her. She collects found materials that have originated from farming practices and reinvents them as artworks.

Likewise, artist Spencer Finch looks deeply into

Shared histories and myths ... the archetypal places and images of America, particularly those which allude to its rolling tendency towards seclusion and engagement, isolation and activism ... (Seear 2009).

While the subject matter of the exhibition *As if the sea should part and show a further sea*, at the Queensland Art Gallery in 2009, is almost transient in nature, Finch states that he is not an abstract painter but rather more interested in the Chinese linear flatness 'and the manner in which they were able to impart a sense of immensity, of space' (Chambers 2009, p. 13). This interest resulted in a group of seascape watercolours which combined both keen observation and variations in light and colour without resorting to more traditional modes of depiction (Fig. 16). The apparent simplicity of the completed paintings is deceptive, as Finch analytically recorded and charted all the colours he observed in the different bodies of water he painted.

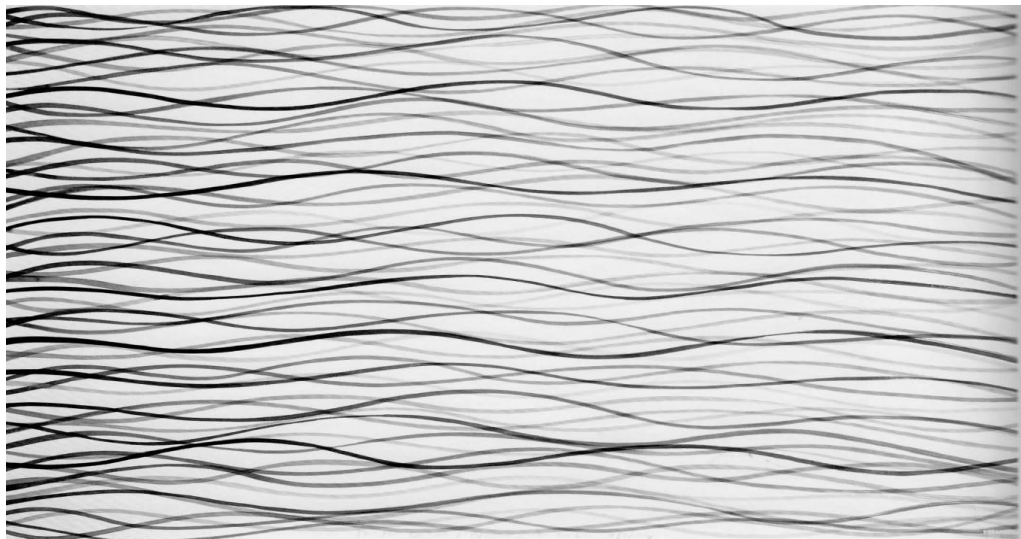


Figure 16: Spencer Finch, *Pacific Ocean, Noosa, Australia, April 1, 2008 (Afternoon Effect)*, 2009

The water molecule contains both a positive and negative charge and in its liquid shape is able to form and re-form. Like water, my artwork has undergone a number of transformations since this project began. My initial motivation derived from an

attempt to depict a body of water from memory as a form of expression. As the months progressed, I was able to distil and focus on the more fractured, or perhaps more deeply embedded, abstract memories of specific moments relating to water, much like time-lapse photography. These were often informed by, but not strictly adhered to, video stills taken while at home and overseas (see p.19). The video enabled me to halt the seemingly endless flow of water and examine its properties in more detail. What struck me most was how different it could appear. I captured it in various states: hard as concrete; soft and shiny as satin; choppy and unyielding; a luminous reflector of every imaginable colour and a transporter of an assortment of flotsam. In addition, water could appear *looking like water* but also seconds later become something abstract and intangible.

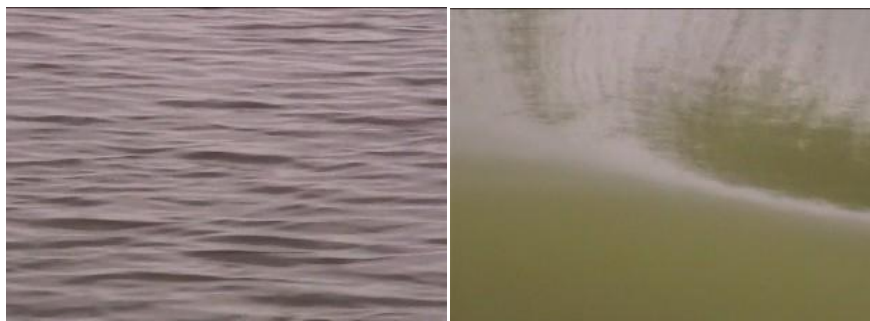


Figure 17: Helene Weeding, Video stills, Peru, July 2010

The selection of stills continued to hold me in their thrall. They contained an abundance of memories that bore no relation to the often non-representational images before me; I was transported back to Machu Picchu the instant I saw them (Fig. 17).

The surface that I began working on in 2010 was paper. I am not entirely sure why I chose paper initially, but it was partly due to my original experiments with watercolour and ink. I suspect that I was also lacking in confidence and that I found paper less intimidating than canvas. I pushed paper to its limit and spent the entire Christmas break working on a 10-metre roll of paper just to see what I could achieve. While the result was not totally unsatisfactory (I was impelled to achieve some sort of resolution), I found that the sheer physical effort and unwieldy nature of the paper was simply too difficult to manage. I also tried painting on canvas boards but felt these works were unresolved and clumsy. Eventually, I reverted to the more traditional surface: canvas. By stapling a length of canvas to a large screen I was able to produce the marks that I had been so attracted to at the beginning of 2010. In fact,

the paintings seemed to gain more depth just through changing from paper to canvas. The paintings became more 'watery' even though they were becoming increasingly more informed by the more abstract video stills I had taken.

When Tzara writes, 'Of all the elements, water is the most faithful "mirror of voices."' (in Bachelard 1983, p. 193), he goes on to state that art can be informed by reflections and, 'The stream, the river, the cascade have, then, a speech that men understand naturally' (p. 194). Gazing at a body of water, I have felt corresponding emotions well up and sometimes this emotional reflection results in a sense of peace, as though my turbulent thoughts have found a place to rest. This relationship is not new, as Balzac in *The Cursed Child* (1831-36) writes, 'He had already, on several occasions, found a mysterious relationship between his emotions and the Ocean's movements' (Bachelard 1983, p. 172) Simon Schama, in his epic book *Landscape and Memory*, says that even though we are used to separating 'nature and human perception into two realms, they are, in fact, indivisible' (2004, p. 6). Schama posits that landscape and memory are closely linked and that an awesome vista is reliant upon a human response to it. By identifying, and perhaps revering it, as Ansel Adams tried to show while photographing Yosemite National Park in 1952, the outcome reflects a deep and personal reaction to this specific location.

I have felt the same deep and individual response to many bodies of water. As a child, growing up in a difficult family situation, the sea claimed and calmed me. Although I was not alone often (practically impossible in a family of eight), I felt a certain degree of privacy and comfort when standing and facing the sea:

... the world outdoors, the open realm of landscape, offered more privacy than the indoor world of obligation. As a kid you often own little more than your privacy, your secret places, the thoughts in your head...I left a crowded, noisy house, the perpetually shared bedroom and wandered into my own space (Winton 1999, pp. xvi-xvii).

## CONCLUSION

My initial research was driven by the idea of delving into my personal responses to water and how it could reflect or absorb my emotions so effortlessly. I was interested in how water could, like emotion, change its state and vary from tangible to elusive, luminous to concrete hardness, yet remain powerful and compelling. In the course of my research I have since discovered that through painting I have been able to make the connection between emotions and water visible.

The project has been an enlightening experience, in more ways than one. It began with a largely uncontrolled subconscious desire to break free from suppressed memories, and accordingly I made every attempt to contain them, first with an almost rigid grid structure and then with the monochromatic palette I stuck to, like a sea anemone to a rock. The development since then is quite significant. By reconfiguring the grid my palette expanded. Despite retaining an intrinsic belief in the importance of the grid, it has become less obvious in my paintings, and is subsequently more powerful. Turbulent waters have given way to calmer reflection and as a result my self-awareness has been heightened. At times, this has caused me considerable pain and has also shocked me, as I had no idea that this project would open some doors that I had believed were firmly shut (Fig. 18).



Figure 18: Helene Weeding, Large format painting on canvas, 2011, (left) with detail (right)

My research began as an intellectual exercise: I read and took notes prolifically and metaphorically patted myself on the back when I found information that justified my premise. Previously, I had hidden any intimate thoughts behind a wall of academia. As the months passed and I realised that I had reached a watershed in my art practice

as well as personally, my writing also took on a different slant. I began to write in a more direct and informal manner. This was difficult for me as I grew up with the tenet that writing anything personal on paper is taboo as it can be too easily misinterpreted. Consequently, despite a struggle to oppose a lifetime of restriction, this project has given me a voice.

The sea holds as many real mysteries as it does myth. This discovery of how the undersea landscape affects the flatness of the surface above made me rethink my original motivation behind this research. I was completely absorbed yet repelled by the view of the Cataract Gorge in flood and wondered if familiar sights would still exist when the water receded. In much the same way, my paintings are of familiar, often turbulent, fast-moving or strange, deep and subtly threatening bodies of water. Some are engaging, while others repel. Upon introspection, I have realised that they have originated from the same source, memory. The memories I have subconsciously been depicting have been suppressed for a considerable period of time. It is only since a resolution has occurred that I have been able to express my thoughts, feelings and emotions through the medium of paint (Fig. 19).



Figure 19: Helene Weeding, Large format painting on canvas, 2011, (left) with detail (right)

The use of the grid, I believe, has also been a subconscious attempt to contain or constrain memories of someone close to me changing from the familiar to the strange and then re-forming, much like Kaika's reference to water as a hybrid. This feeling of confronting the strange and reassembling it (like Annabel Nowlan's work) to make it somewhat familiar again implies a certain transformation and recalls Lippard's idea that we inhabit a certain place situated between the 'known' and 'familiar'. While initially I rejected this place, I have now come to realise that she is correct and that my assertion that this place was concrete instead of ephemeral was uninformed. It has been interesting to discover that even though I felt I had abandoned the grid, I have since realised that it still exists in the underpainting and

also to some degree after completion of the work. It is reframed, but is contained, much like the effect of the removal of masking tape from earlier paintings on paper. The decision not to represent water, devoid of emotion, was enlightening and the final paintings are more of a marriage of the two. They also refer to the ambiguous nature of both water and emotion and the impossibility of simultaneously trying to contain yet set them free.

By utilising less traditional painting tools such as card and rubber squeegees to apply the paint to the surface, chance and randomness began to play a part, which was liberating. The surface of the paintings took on a rich impasto quality coupled with some thinner washes, and raw canvas was also revealed. In the process of layering coloured glazes and thicker oil paint paste, the paradox of vagueness/openness emerged, connecting to the uncanny/strange via 'aesthetic' experience suggested by Freud. The strange is best exemplified by Ian Burn's *Value Added Landscapes*, whereas the familiar landscapes of Patrick Grieve resonate with many Tasmanians as part of a collective or group memory. Whether this memory is real or an illusion is a question I have researched. I have come to a conclusion and agree with Beardsley that memories for an artist are assembled over a lifetime. Artworks resulting from these memories can be found in the overlap between conscious and unconscious thought or Caroline Rannersberger's 'gap'.

David Hockney also believes that the making of art is unconscious and instinctive and is generated from memory, and that memory is unique and individual. I believe it is also collective. This idea of a group memory refers to what is 'familiar' and recalls Kathleen Petyarre's paintings of her land and home, while some personal memories are strange and fragmented, laden as they are with emotive responses. By layering thin and thick paint in more recent works, new meanings and contexts were formed, with the fragmented memory being reframed, much like my paintings. When the grid became almost invisible, it began to allude more to my own specific and personal history. I was suddenly 'in the water', not standing looking at it. Fragmentation of memory was also underlined by the water videos I took in both Australia and Peru. The abstract qualities produced by pausing the film at random intervals made it easier to relate to, and distil, complex glimpses of memories and take a short mental note before beginning to paint.

While the flood at the Cataract Gorge was the trigger for my initial research, I have always been more attracted to the sea, particularly from a shoreline stance. This has not diminished, but my interest has shifted focus as this project has developed. I found that I had delved deeper into both water and, subsequently, memory:

The stream doesn't have to be ours; the water doesn't have to be ours. The anonymous water knows all my secrets. And the same memory issues from every spring (Bachelard, in Schama 2004, p. 244).

I realised that my original water studies were not so much an outpouring of memory and emotion, but instead were a release of energy, with emotive overtones. They were a reaction. In recent paintings, deeper reflection literally allowed me to depict deeper water as poignant signifier of memory.

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